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Divided by Politics and the 38th Parallel

When Japan's colonial hold on Korea ended with its defeat in 1945, United States forces entered the South and the Soviet Army took over in the North by mutual agreement, dividing the country at the 38th parallel. When discussions on Korea's future broke down in May 1946, the division became frozen.

With no unified national government in sight, the occupying powers organized civilian regimes in North and South. In the North, a Communist state emerged under Kim Il Sung. In the South, the United States set up an interim legislature and Government, which quickly became dominated by Dr. Syngman Rhee, who became President.

The United Nations General Assembly formed a temporary commission in 1947 to plan for a national election and a government for all of Korea. The United States and most South Koreans favored that move but the Soviet Union and the North's leaders rejected it.

After elections in the South in May 1948, the Republic of Korea was proclaimed in Seoul in August, ending the American occupation. North Korea held its own elections and proclaimed the Democratic People's Republic in September, with Pyongyang as its capital.

On June 25, 1950, a strong armored force from the North crossed the 38th parallel and captured Seoul four days later. A three-year war ensued, with United Nations forces, primarily those of the United States, backing South Korea. A cease-fire agreement was signed on July 27, 1953, and a demilitarized zone was established along the 38th parallel.

By current estimates, the South Korean Army has 520,000 men in uniform, with several million more in the reserves. The North Korean Army has 750,000 troops on active duty, also backed by large reserves.